

450

THE FARALLON ISLANDS

CALIFORNIA



A paper read before

THE NATIONAL SOCIETY
OF COLONIAL DAMES OF AMERICA
IN THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

San Francisco, California

April 5, 1932

By MILDRED BROOKE HOOVER

Chairman, Historic Research Committee



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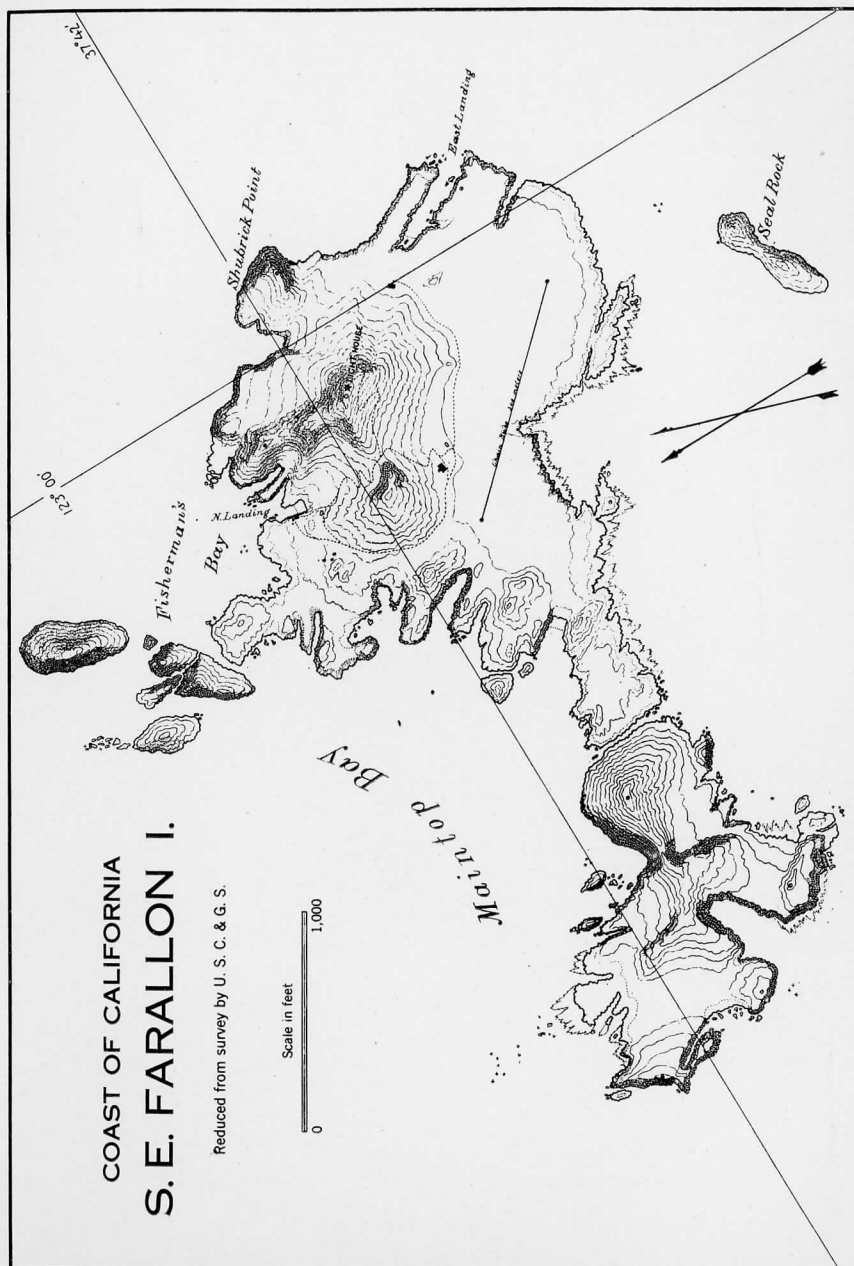
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
MAP OF SOUTHEAST FARALLON ISLAND	<i>frontispiece</i>
HISTORICAL SURVEY	I
BIRDS AND BIRD LIFE	9
ILLUSTRATION—SOUTHEAST FARALLON ISLAND . .	<i>facing</i> II
PLANT LIFE	II
THE LIGHT STATION	12
LIFE ON THE ISLAND	13
BIBLIOGRAPHY	15

THE FARALLON ISLANDS CALIFORNIA

THE FARALLON ISLANDS, ruggedly picturesque, lie off the coast of California, south of Point Reyes and northwest of Point Montara. They are a part of the quartz diorite batholith that extends from Ben Lomond to Bodega Head. On the Coast and Geodetic Survey map they are represented in a rough line twelve miles in length and one-half a mile in breadth at the widest place. The southernmost and largest island lies thirty-two miles west of the Golden Gate.

These islands may be seen on a clear day from hills both north and south of San Francisco. They were observed in their magnificent desolation by early voyagers of the South Sea, sometimes rising like icebergs on the horizon, sometimes threatening destruction by the proximity of their shoals.

Sir Francis Drake, writing in the sixteenth century, said:

Ever since Almighty God commanded Adam to subdue the earth, there have not wanted in all ages some heroical spirits which, in obedience to that higher mandate, either from manifest reason alluring them, or by secret instinct inforcing them there-unto, have expended their wealth, employed their times, and adventured their persons, to finde out the true circuit there-of.

It is to records left by such "heroical spirits" that one must go for the early story of the Farallones. In the following pages will be found facts gleaned from these sources, arranged to show the place of these islands in Pacific Coast history.

THE name Los Farallones is derived from the Spanish nautical word meaning "cliff or small, pointed island in the sea," and was fixed on this particular group during the years when the Spanish galleons plied between the Philip-

pinos and Mexico. It has been printed in many books that Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo discovered and named them in 1542, but a careful perusal of the diary of Bartolome Ferrello, who made the report of that voyage, reveals no mention of these islands.

Sir Francis Drake, the most distinguished naval hero of England, passed between these rocky islets and the coast of California in his search for the Strait of Anian in 1577-1578. Queen Elizabeth aided Drake to set out on his more or less piratical voyage. The menace of roving Spanish ships did not prevent her from sending trading vessels to whatever part of the world she pleased. Some five years previous to this time, Sir Francis, in his journey to Nombre de Dios, had been at a point where, by ascending a tree on the summit of a hill, he could see on the one hand the waters of the Atlantic Ocean and on the other hand the waters of the Pacific Ocean. The Pacific had been discovered by Vasco Nunez de Balboa in 1513 and named in 1520 by Ferdinand Magellan, but it was as yet a little explored expanse of blue water. Being much impressed by its wonderful possibilities, Drake besought God to privilege him, at some time, to sail thither and make "a perfect discovery" of the Pacific.

On November 17, 1577, he accordingly set out of England from the "sound Plimmouth" in the ship "Pellican," later renamed the "Golden Hinde," accompanied by the ships "Elizabeth," "Marigold," "Swan," and "Christopher," "all well-manned and supplied with plentiful provision." When they reached the lower end of South America and passed the Strait of Magellan they encountered severe storms. Instead of "Mare Pacificum," they said, it were better named "Mare Furiosum"; but the ensuing journey was not so difficult. Sir Francis, in his *World Encompassed*, published after the return to England, writes of wonderful joy in the beauties of the marine surroundings of the South Seas. The title page of this book contains these quaint words placed there by the publisher: "Offered now at last to publique view, both for the honor of the actor, but especially for the stirring up of

heroik spirits, to benefit their countrie, and eternize their names by like noble attempts." On June 17, having reduced their fleet to the "Golden Hinde" only, they "fell on a convenient and fit harbour and came to anchor therein," remaining until July 23, repairing the ship and making friends with the Indians. Before leaving this place "our general" caused to be set up "a brass plate nailed to a great and firme post." It was not until forty-one years later that the "Mayflower" landed at Plymouth Rock. Leaving "Nova Albion," as the place had been named by them, Drake and his followers set sail on July 23, and within twenty-four hours they stopped at the Farallones, which they called the Islands of Saint James, "having on them plentiful and great store of seals and birds." From one of them they took "such provision as might competently serve our turne for awhile."

In 1595 Rodriguez Cermenho and his companions, on their voyage between Manila and Acapulco in the "San Augustin," encountered a severe storm and anchored in Bahia Grande, or the Bay of San Francisco—for the place is mentioned in their records under the two names. They here constructed a launch, the "San Buena Ventura," planning it for an auxiliary boat. However, before setting sail, the "San Augustin" was grounded and broken up by the waves, forcing them to proceed in the launch only. On December 8, 1595, they started south, heading first for the small barren islands which they had previously passed "on the land side about a league or more from shore."

In 1603 General Sebastian Viscainyo found remains of the "San Augustin" in these waters. A part of his crew who had previously been of the "San Augustin" crew recognized the place and the wreck. Returning to Spain, Viscainyo made a "derrotero" or navigation track, in which he mentions the Farallon group as a mark for finding Punta de los Reyes and the harbor of Drake's Bay. This expedition mentioned an "Isle Hendida," now considered to be the Southeast Farallon.

Admiral George Anson's *Voyage Around the World in*

1740 to 1744 gives (opposite page 385) a copy of a map taken as a part of the treasure from a Spanish galleon. In this map the ocean routes from the Philippines to Mexico are charted and the Farallones are shown in its northern part.

ON Tuesday, October 31, 1769, the overland expedition from Mexico under the leadership of Governor Gaspar de Portolá sighted the Farallones from the summit of a hill.

Seven rocky white islands could be seen. . . . Sighted the Punta de los Reyes and the Farallones of the Port of San Francisco, which landmarks when compared with the sailing directions of the pilot Cabrera Bueno, were found to be correct.

It is thus stated in the diary of Don Miguel Costanso, the engineer of the expedition; and in Father Crespi's diary of the same expedition is written:

On the thirtieth of October we got sight of Point Reyes and the Farallones at the Bay of San Francisco. It was supposed that this was the Bay found by Sir Francis Drake until a few days further examination proved that it was not.

These were the first white men to see the now famous Bay of San Francisco. The point from which the Farallones were sighted is between the Montara fog signal and Point San Pedro.



Captain Don Manuel de Ayala kept the log of the "San Carlos," the first boat to enter the bay of San Francisco. On the way from Manila to Monterey the North Farallones were sighted at four in the afternoon on June 24, 1775. At seven that evening the South Farallones were sighted. After a stay of a month at Monterey to unload the cargo and repair the boat, Captain Ayala, with pilots Aguirre and Canizares and Father Santa Maria, on July 26, set sail for the new port of San Francisco. Contrary winds from the northwest delayed progress. On the evening of August 4 the southernmost Farallon was seen, distant about eight leagues. A few days later San Francisco Bay was entered by this boat and the launch accompanying it, picking a channel by

careful soundings. Father Crespi says that they "remained at anchor in the bay forty days in which time they had an opportunity to explore it."

On August 26, 1774, Juan Perez, in the "Santiago," sighted the Farallones and the next day anchored in Monterey Bay.

On August 28, 1775, this same "Santiago," commanded by Bruno de Hezeta, again passed the Farallones, but in so dense a fog that their outlines were barely discerned.

On the second expedition of Juan Bautista de Anza, Pedro Font made a map, toward the last of March 1776, with a graphometer loaned by Father Palou. He marked the port of San Francisco with an H and said of it:

It is a marvel of nature and might well be called the harbour of Harbours . . . about six or eight leagues out at sea are seen some rather large farallones like white rocks which have this shape , and with respect to the exterior mouth of the port they lie west by south. To the west of the same point there are seen nearer the coast four other farallones which look like this .

The spot from which Pedro Font made this map was Point Lobos, where on December 4, 1774, Captain de Rivera on the first Anza expedition had placed a cross. On the beach south of Point Lobos they found the wreck of Ayala's cayuco, two pieces of which Anza carried away as relics.

On November 12, 1792, Captain George Vancouver anchored at the north point of Port Bodega and made a chart which was later used in the Rezanoff voyage. At this date the Farallones were referred to as "Los Frayles" (The Friars).

Hope of finding a "Strait of Anian" seems to have vanished by this time, and colonization of the Pacific Coast was under way. The huge Russian nation was expanding. In its efforts to find scope for its energies it ventured ever farther for fur gathering. Boats came down from the Aleutian Islands. Count Nickolai Rezanoff came in 1806. G. H. von Langsdorff, a doctor who accompanied him, thus writes under date of March 27:

Early in the morning we saw lying to the south the group of rocks called Los Farallones de Puerta de San Francisco, and to the east the Promontory of Punta de los Reyes, . . . we were at this time carried by the current two miles to the south inside of an hour. Steering now directly for the Puerta we had much satisfaction in proving the correctness of Vancouver's charts and views which left nothing further to be desired.

A settlement was made on the California mainland at Bodega Bay and fur-gatherers were placed on the Farallones. The barrenness of the islands and the lack of proper food and shelter caused much sickness and death among these men.

Zackhar Chichinoff, one of a party sent there in 1819, tells in the von Langsdorff book of his experience as follows:

A schooner took us down to the islands but we had to cruise around for over a week before we could make a landing. We had a few planks with us and some canvas, and with that scanty material and some sea-lion skins we built huts for shelter. We had a little drift wood and used to burn the fat of sea-lions and seals for cooking purposes. When we landed we had about a hundred and twenty pounds of flour and ten or twelve pounds of tea and, as we were nine persons, the provisions did not last long and we were soon reduced to sea-lion, seal, and fish. The water was very bad, also, being taken from hollow places in the rocks where it stood all the year round. We had no fire-arms; the sea-lions were killed with clubs or spears. The sea-lion meat was salted down in barrels and boxes which we had brought with us, and in holes in the rocks. Once only, about six months after we had landed on the islands, one of the company's brigs came and took away the salted meat and a lot of the fur-seal skins, and then went on her way, leaving about one hundred pounds of flour, a few pounds of tea and some salt. About a month afterward the scurvy broke out among us and in a short time all were sick except myself. My father and two others were all that kept at work and they were growing weaker every day. Two of the Aleuts died a month after the disease broke out. All the next winter we passed there in great misery and when the spring came the men were too weak to kill sea-lions, and all we could do was to crawl around the cliffs, and gather some sea-birds eggs and suck them raw.

The brig "Rurik," under its master Otto von Kotzebue, passed the Farallones in October 1816. It was Adelbert Chamisso of this expedition who named our California poppy *Eschscholtzia californica* in honor of Dr. Johann Friedrich Eschscholtz, ship's surgeon on the voyage.

Under the date of May 1825, in his *Narrative of Four Voyages*, Captain Benjamin Morrell, Jr., gives the following:

On Wednesday, the eleventh, we arrived at the Farallon Islands in Latitude $37^{\circ}41'N$; Longitude $122^{\circ}35'W$. These are nothing but a cluster of rocky Islands, destitute of vegetation. The southernmost of which is the largest: is about two miles in circumference, of an oblong shape, lying E.N.E. and W.S.W. On each end is a hill, rising about three hundred feet and declining to a valley in the center of the island, forming the appearance when viewed from the north or south, of a saddle. Many years ago this place was the resort of numerous fur seal but the Russians have made such havoc among them that there is scarcely a breed left. On this barren rock we found a Russian family and twenty-three Codiaks, or northwest Indians, with their bark canoes. They were employed in taking sea-leopards, sea-horses, and sea-elephants for their skins, oil and flesh: the latter being jerked for the Russian market on the northwest coast. At the time of our visit they had about fifty tons of this beef cured and were then expecting the arrival of a Russian vessel to take off the beef and leave them a supply of fresh water, there being none on the island.

This island is of volcanic origin: most of the rocks have evidently once been in a state of fusion and the lowland is covered with pumice stone. Aquatic birds in considerable variety resort hither for purposes of laying and incubation; but the Russians seldom give them a chance for the latter process, generally securing the eggs as fast as they are deposited. After carefully examining this island, without finding a single fur seal, we bore away for port San Francisco where we arrived on the twelfth of May.

The Russians had taken two hundred thousand fur seals from the Farallon Islands in the short space of three seasons, about 1810. The depletion resulting precluded a perma-

nent income which might have been realized had the taking been regulated.

William Gale, who had been employed on the islands as a seal hunter, conceived the idea of having boats come direct from New England for California produce. It was his suggestion to a Boston trading company which resulted in the hide-and-tallow traffic from California to Boston around Cape Horn—an indirect contribution to world industry made by the Farallones. Richard Henry Dana in *Two Years Before the Mast* writes of this trade.

Captain Frederick William Beechy of the British Royal Navy came upon the Farallones on November 6, 1828. He mentions them as two clusters of rocks which, in consequence of the shoals about them, are extremely dangerous to vessels approaching San Francisco in foggy weather, "which until better known should be avoided." The shoals have been examined scientifically since that time. They are caused by a broad submerged embankment, representing the delta of an ancient river built up by deposits of fine silt brought through the Golden Gate and deposited near these rocky islands. Captain Beechy further wrote:

Already have the Russians encroached upon the territory by possessing themselves of the Farallones and some islands off Santa Barbara; and in their new settlement at Rossi, a few miles to the westward of Bodega, are so near upon the boundary as to be the cause of much jealous feeling; not without reason, it would appear, as I am informed it is well fortified, and presents to California an example of what may be effected upon her shores in a short time by industry.

Finally, Captain Sir Edward Belcher, in his *Narrative of a voyage around the world performed in Her Majesty's ship "Sulphur," 1836-1842*, mentions the Farallones.

So much for historical mention of the Farallones. Little has been written about them in recent times, for comparatively few travelers have landed upon these islands. Boats from the far corners of the earth pass within hailing distance on entering San Francisco Bay. But only the few persons in-

terested either commercially or scientifically in the islands have furnished information regarding conditions upon them. Many of the early books on California have brief mention of them, but their area is so small and the changes occurring there are so slight that what mainly needs to be done is to bring together what is already recorded in various places.

VISITS of ornithologists have been productive of results of value to those interested in avifauna. The Farallones might well be called Bird Islands. Many rocky islets off the coast of California are homes of seabirds, but the Farallones have the largest area of any bird islands belonging to the United States.

The southeastern island of this group includes something over one hundred acres. It is irregular in outline and comprises numerous caves, coves, and promontories. The entire island is ringed by an old coast line, fifty feet above the present sea-level, which is easily distinguished by numerous water-worn caves. The rugged marine scenery is literally covered at times with marine birds. The few land birds found are migrants, which merely stop to rest for a day or two, an exception being the sweet-voiced rock wren which lays on the islands its five or more glossy white eggs, sparingly spotted with brown, in its nest built of chips of rock.

The most picturesque bird found in this marine aviary is the Tufted Puffin, which lays a single egg with deep shell-markings of lilac; it uses pieces of dry, wild weed, scraped together, for a nest. Cormorants nest here also, laying their three to five light blue eggs, and leaving sardines and other small fish always lying about. Also there are Guillemots, timid birds with a curious habit of bowing, that collect pebbles and bits of rock upon which to lay two eggs of a light greenish color, handsomely marked at the larger end with a wreath of brown and lilac blotches. Petrels, both Ashy and Leach's, Auklets, Murres, and Western Gulls comprise the rest of this marine aviary. The Ashy (Coue's) Petrel is a gentle bird whose diminutive "petteretterell" sound may be heard

at night at short range only. It is found solely in California waters. The female lays one solitary egg in a hidden burrow; both bird and burrow are identified by a musky odor. The Auklets, also, are nocturnal in habit and hide away in safe retreats, using cavities and rabbit burrows for nests. They lay one unmarked greenish-white egg. Mr. Chester Barlow, one of the California ornithologists collecting toward the close of the nineteenth century, wrote of a trip to the islands made on the launch well named "The Active." One evening while there, with some of the children living on the island he went out carrying a lantern to study the Auklets. The flare of the light blinded the birds so that a few were easily procured as specimens. The others, once beyond the lantern's gleam, flew away with lightning speed. The accompanying photograph was made by Mr. Barlow on this visit in 1892.

At the time of the 1849 gold rush to California, when food of all kinds was at a premium in San Francisco, egg-picking on the Farallones became a remunerative and well-organized industry. There was one essential item in the equipment of the workers—a loose-fitting jacket with capacious pockets inside the front. At a given signal the day's operations began: every man started on the run for a favored spot among the nests. The Murres and Gulls lay their eggs upon the rocks. The Murre eggs, greenish in color with individual dark markings, are more palatable than those of the Gulls and were thus in greater demand. Now the Western Gull, snowy breasted, pearl-backed, "with pinions fit for an angel's wings," is a great thief, sometimes stealing an egg from beneath a sitting Murre. When the men made the morning rush among the birds, the Murres took flight at once, leaving the contest for eggs between the less fearful Gulls and the men, the former sometimes succeeding in breaking eggs before the latter could reach them.

When the loose-fronted jackets were full of eggs the men descended the slippery rocks with care to deposit their booty in hidden baskets—hidden because of the Gulls. Accidents were not unknown and to fall while wearing a coat full

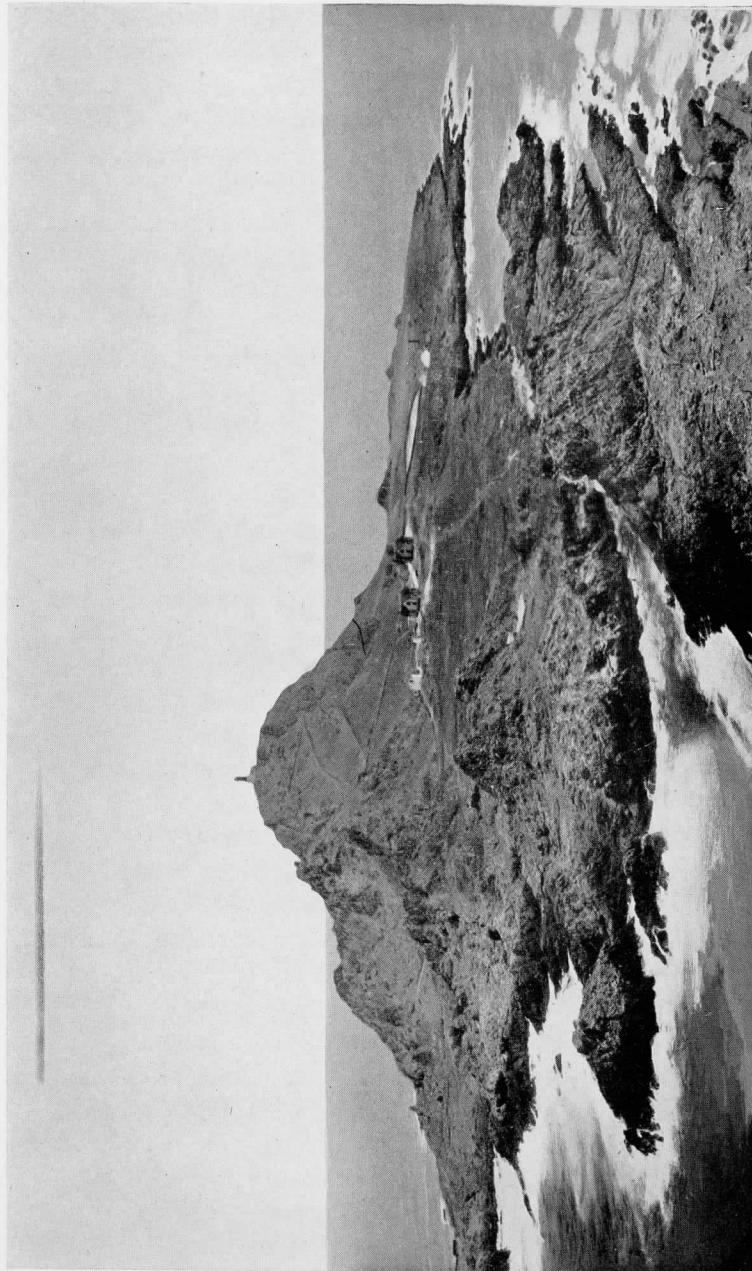


PHOTO BY CHESTER BARLOW, 1892

Courtesy of University of California, Museum of Vertebrate Zoology

SOUTHEAST FARALLON ISLAND

of eggs delayed the worker at least long enough to wash out the pockets with cold sea water. Time after time each man's coat was filled and emptied on good "picking" days.

It is stated that in the year 1853 one boat carried a thousand dozen eggs, the product of two days' labor, to San Francisco and sold them at one dollar a dozen. The Murres and Gulls are the most numerous species in this bird colony. During the years when there was no law against "egging" the men purposely destroyed many young Gulls and Gulls' eggs for the protection of the Murre egg industry. As a result of the interest of ornithologists, the place has now been made a bird sanctuary under the jurisdiction of the Lighthouse Service.

No visitors are allowed to land between April fifteenth and August fifteenth each year. And there are, of course, no accommodations for visitors other than those provided by the good nature of the few resident families.

PLANT life is not plentiful owing to the lack of soil. There are no shrubs or trees. In July 1892 Mr. J. W. Blankinship collected specimens on the island. In this collection were four lichens, twenty-four algae, one fern, and one moss, the moss being abundant. During some seasons of the year plants whose seeds have been carried thither in hay and packing grow to a limited extent. And in addition to these are a dozen small native flowering plants, the largest of which is *Baeria maritima*, or Farallon weed, having a small yellow blossom. It spreads for a length of two to four feet on the ground but is only a few inches in height. It is used for greens, and when dry is appropriated by birds for nest building. Thousands of rabbits, the progeny of a few carried to the islands years ago, feed on this wild plant, thus making an acceptable meat supply in February and March.

There is a garden patch of perhaps two acres with soil a few inches deep. Here lettuce, carrots, onions, and such things may be grown in the spring. There is no frost, but great care must be exercised to protect the patch from the depredations

of the birds and the rabbits. The average temperature is 64° F.

Living here is thus a sort of Swiss Family Robinson existence. From the rocky shore sea-trout, bull-heads, eels, rock-cod, and other fish are caught. Many species of mollusks are found on the island. Mussels and abalones are obtained at low tide, and small barracuda and blue cod are found by deep-sea fishing from boats.

THE United States Light Station on the Southeast Farallon was established in 1855, one of the earliest on the Pacific Coast and also one of the most important. The present incandescent lantern of two hundred and eighty thousand candle power is visible at sea to a distance of twenty-three miles. The lens was made in France.

The fog signal can be heard eight miles, or farther if weather conditions are right. This whistle, six inches in diameter, was established in 1859 over a natural hole in the roof of a long cavern connected with the ocean. It is blown by the rush of air through the passage and is low or loud depending upon the height of the tide and the force of the waves.

The one island only is inhabited, the others being mere rocky points above the water and practically inaccessible. The Lighthouse Service occupies about a dozen buildings. A head keeper and four assistants have the care of the light. Each man is allowed ninety-six days off duty each year. There usually are not more than eighteen residents on the islands.

The United States Government maintains an important geodetic station here. As it is located west of the San Andreas fault, valuable data on earth movement in this area are obtained by checking observations with the stations at Tamalpais, Ross Mountain, and Chaparral. A weather station formerly here was abandoned some twenty years ago.

The naval service occupies a half-dozen buildings: one of its duties is to send weather reports twice daily to headquar-

ters on Harrison Street, San Francisco. During the World War twenty-six marines under a sergeant patrolled the island.

CHARLES NORDHOFF, writing of the residents of these islands in 1847, said, "the boom of the surf is their constant and only music." It is still their *constant* but not their *only* music. For radio reception on the island is good, most of the families there each had a radio as soon as radios were available, and dancing to radio music is a common evening pastime. The human habitations are built on the southeastern part of a wave-cut terrace extending from the elevated old shore-line to the present shore-line. The keeper's house, built of native stone, is one and a half stories high, with four rooms, including a sun porch, downstairs, and two rooms upstairs. The other dwellings are frame. All are lighted with wick lamps.

There are three springs on the island. The water from these is tinged a light orange. It is soft and good for the skin but is not used for drinking or cooking. An artificial watershed measuring fifty by one hundred feet has been made of cement, and the water thus procured from rains is stored in two large dome-shaped cisterns holding forty thousand gallons each. During the dry season the watershed is used as a tennis court.

There are no roads on the island. Footpaths on the rocks lead from one dwelling to another and up to the lighthouse. A small tow car, drawn by men, conveys supplies from boat landing to storehouse.

There are two landings, the North and the South. Mail is received once a week. The lighthouse tender, bringing supplies from San Francisco, makes the trip once a fortnight and stays an hour or two for unloading. Once in three months the beach apparatus is taken out by all hands and the shot line is fired.

Some years ago a small school was kept, but the present policy of the Lighthouse Service is to transfer a man with children of school age to a place where a school is available.

On Southeast Island are many named places: Sugar Loaf, at the northernmost extremity, is a conglomerate of huge rounded boulders of sandstone; at Noonday Rock there is a whistling buoy; the river Jordan, a narrow strait over which a wooden bridge is kept in repair, is between East End and West End; Franconia (Maintop) Bay at the West End is named for the wreck of a ship of that name; the cave at East End contains a beautiful growth of sea-mosses and is accessible at low tide; Fisherman's Bay is the largest cove; Indian Head has an altitude of ninety-five feet and Beacon Rock one of three hundred and fifty-four feet. The lighthouse is situated on the top of Beacon Rock.

Thus runs the story of "Los Farallones" from the adventurous days of romance to the adventurous days of realism. The eyes that first looked upon their bold ruggedness in the vast, uncharted sea, and the hands that wrote of those weary voyages in frail sailing vessels beset by every peril have long since returned to the dust of their homelands; but these rocky sentinels still withstand the beating of the mighty waters and in their strength provide refuge and guidance: refuge for birds whose winged life is passed between wave and sky; guidance for craft bringing human lives and modern cargoes to the Golden Gate.

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